

Commerce Committee Hearing on Airline Customer Service
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June 28, 2000

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding a hearing on this important matter. On behalf of the millions of air passengers traveling every year, I want to thank you for your attention to this issue.

Coming from a state which is vastly under served in terms of access to air service, I can tell you the air passengers in Maine need some protections from a service industry which too often seems to be more concerned about the bottom line and profits than the service they provide. That is why I became an original cosponsor of legislation reported by this Committee last year -- the Airline Customer Service Commitment Act -- which was designed to spur improvements in airline customer service. I also fought for provisions in AIR-21, the FAA reauthorization bill, to enhance a range of customer service protections, including protections for disabled travelers.

Among the major provisions of the Airline Customer Service Commitment Act were requirements to : direct the DOT Inspector General to report to Congress on the effectiveness of the airlines in living up to their customer

service commitments; direct the DOT to increase the airlines' financial responsibility to passengers for lost bags; and significantly increase the civil penalties against airlines that violate aviation consumer protection laws.

Such customer service improvements are long overdue, Mr. Chairman. According to figures from the U.S. Department of Transportation, the number of passenger complaints per 100,000 passenger boardings was 26% higher in 1998 than the year before. The airlines argue that despite the increase in consumer complaints, the actual number of complaints -- roughly 6,000 annually -- is relatively low when taking into account the approximately 500 million aircraft boardings that occur annually.

Nevertheless, one customer service survey found that of a list of 33 major American institutions, only the Internal Revenue Service received worse consumer satisfaction ratings than the airline industry. And DOT estimates that for every complaint it receives against an airline, the airlines themselves receive anywhere from 100 to 400 complaints. You know things are really bad when the situation has sunk to this level...

This is why Congress and the airlines have both taken steps to address

customer service concerns. Last year, the airlines voluntarily entered into a joint agreement to make a range of customer service improvements, such as offering the lowest fare available, notifying customers of delays, cancellations, and diversions, and being more responsive to customer service complaints in general.

In addition, the FAA reauthorization bill, which was signed into law earlier this year, as well as last year's transportation appropriations legislation, included provisions designed to bring a greater focus to the concerns of air travelers.

For example, the FAA bill included a provision I authored requiring air carriers to notify the purchaser of any expiration date of an electronic ticket. The measure also required the DOT IG to monitor the implementation of each airline's customer service plan, and evaluate and report on how each airline is living up to its commitment. The bill also added preventing discrimination against the handicapped as one of the responsibilities of the DOT consumer office.

The FY2000 DOT appropriations legislation included language requiring

the DOT IG to investigate whether air carriers are engaging in unfair and deceptive practices and methods of competition when they sell tickets on flights that are already overbooked or offer different low fares through different media (such as the telephone or the Internet). The IG was also required to report to Congress on the extent to which barriers exist to access to comparative price and service information from independent resources (such as travel agents) on the purchase of airline tickets. In addition, the legislation required the IG to report on the extent to which carriers deny travel to airline consumers with non-refundable tickets from one carrier to another. Finally, the legislation expressed the sense of the Senate that the penalty for involuntary “bumping” of passengers should be doubled.

None of this is to say that airlines have an easy job. I understand that airlines face significant challenges, including: efforts to increase efficiency and at the same time remain profitable; increased demand for flights; air travel delays due to inadequate airport and air traffic control infrastructure; and a range of other factors.

In addition, the airlines have a responsibility to their share holders. But they also have a responsibility to the public. In my view, the airlines need to

remember that they must serve the passenger if they wish to continue serving the share holder. Because, Mr. Chairman, without the passenger, there would not be any share holders.

In recent years, I have received numerous complaints from constituents in Maine who have had horrible experiences while traveling on commercial carriers. These experiences do not reflect a real commitment on the part of some major airlines to customer service, or even an understanding of what travelers expect.

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I hope we can explore some of these issues and concerns today. I look forward in particular to hearing from the DOT IG on the results of the work they have been doing in this area. And I firmly believe that we must act on the findings of the IG, in order to ensure that the airlines improve customer service in real, tangible ways.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.